

VZCZCXYZ0001
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTI #0199 0771423
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 171423Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6825
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TIRANA 000199

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [NATO](#) [PREL](#) [AL](#)
SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER MEDIU RESIGNS OVER WEEKEND
EXPLOSIONS

Classified By: Ambassador John L. Withers II, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) In a one-on-one meeting March 17, Albanian Defense Minister Fatmir Mediu told the Ambassador that he would resign later that afternoon. The proximate cause of his departure, he maintained, was "moral responsibility" for the March 15 explosions at a military weapons depot that to date have resulted in ten confirmed deaths, hundreds of wounded, and widespread destruction of two nearby civilian communities (septel). Mediu claimed that he had phoned Prime Minister Berisha with the news of his resignation and that the PM had reluctantly concurred. He insisted the PM had not asked him to resign. The Minister also reported that he had spoken to opposition leader Edi Rama and that Rama had told him in confidence that the opposition's call for Mediu to step down came over Rama's personal reservations. Finally, Mediu said that he was unconcerned with any investigation that the government might launch, that he would be fully cooperative with the Prosecutor General's inquiries, and that the final result would be to establish the legality of his actions vis-a-vis the Gerdec explosions.

¶2. (C) Mediu specifically raised the concern that his actions not affect the decision at the upcoming Bucharest Summit on a possible NATO invitation for Albania. He asked the Ambassador's view on whether Allies might see his resignation as instability in the Albanian government at this crucial time. The Ambassador replied that the tragedy at Gerdec was an accident and should have no bearing on NATO's evaluation of Albanian preparedness. It would be important, however, not to allow a domestic feeding frenzy over this episode to convey the very impression of instability that Mediu wished to avoid. The Minister smiled wanly and said, "So we should be quick about it?" The Ambassador replied, "Unfortunately, yes."

¶3. (C) Mediu also went out of his way to mention an expected New York Times article, which he claimed would attack him for being complicit in an arms deal sending Chinese-made weapons to Afghanistan. While not illegal under Albanian law, the matter is being investigated by the Department of Defense. The article, according to Mediu, was prompted by his political enemies and will assert corrupt actions on Mediu's part. Although Mediu again protested his innocence, he conceded that the timing of the article, which he expects out very soon, would be deeply embarrassing to the government at a very sensitive time. His resignation, he said, would spare the GOA and particularly the Prime Minister, whom he lauded on numerous occasions as a visionary and historical figure, from that humiliation.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Mediu was showing signs of great stress. At various points in the conversation, he became teary and his voice cracked. At others, he was defiant and said that he would be proven right in the long term. That said, we do not have to take his claims of falling on his sword at face value. In our estimation, Berisha called this particular

shot, as he so often does, with the larger picture in mind. That is, caught between a domestic firestorm with Mediu at its center and the need to project the best possible face for NATO under difficult circumstances, the Prime Minister clearly feels that sacrificing Mediu immediately is the best among bad choices. We will follow up in coming days but our first reading of the situation is that he's got it right.

WITHERS